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Schools, Colleges, and the Industrial Arts

by RICHARD F. BACH

MY major premise is that America must lead the world in industrial arts—this means not only in materials and execution, but in imaginative design as well. Materials we have in quantity, execution our skill has mastered, but design—there lies the present obstacle in the way of our leadership. That obstacle is the lack of schools of industrial art and more than that it is also the lack of any study of industrial arts, theoretical or practical, in general schools. We have made sporadic efforts at vocational instruction, producing the skilled mechanic but not the technician in design. We have also made untold efforts in the direction of teaching drawing—unequal combat with ingenious instruments and materials, as it has been called. In fact, in all the states of the union the secondary schools teach drawing; in all the states but one the elementary schools teach drawing. Little by little this instruction has been given a practical trend, in subjects chosen, in a gradual approximation to design rather than meaningless representation, in a reluctant leaning toward the occasional execution of a design. There are, of course, exceptional cases of schools that really give opportunities in the industrial arts or that infuse a distinct element of design into the hard-ridden hobby of vocational study or manual training—too often manual at the expense of mental. But on the whole the industrial arts have not by any means been given their just deserts in either general or special schools.

Of special schools we have a baker's dozen, or, generously, we may say eighteen; that is about one for each six millions of our population. Even if we had a special school for each sixty thousand we would still fail of our goal for a generation to come; for these schools would have to make good many decades of neglect on the part of American producers, they

would have to fight an uphill battle against the increasing strength of Europe which is established in the field and stands ready to sell talent for dollars. These special schools would still be for the specialized practitioners, for the designers. They would in a practical way have their influence on all of us, because they would improve the character of objects available in the shops. Yet beyond this there is still the enormous territory of public taste, the training of which must be accomplished by a shorter road than any yet mentioned. Thus, the solution must be found partly in the schools we have, not left entirely for those we have yet to establish—and among those that we have I include the colleges as well. Leadership will not come to America until the people generally have attained a higher appreciation of industrial art, for only then can they express an intelligent demand for good design. This demand is a prerequisite since it represents a foundation upon which to build up educational principles in the teaching of the industrial arts.

But there are several other factors to be considered in this struggle for American leadership in industrial arts production. First is our abuse of the machine, a willing but highly complicated tool, which has developed so far as to become a sort of Juggernaut. Now it is the master, and designs must conform to its requirements. Without the machine we shall never get anywhere, for it brings objects of industrial art within reach of every purse; yet *with* the machine we shall get no further unless we realize its limitations, and, above all, the fact that it is an unthinking mechanism devised to help production, not to control it. Mass production is the fetish of the age, but mass production in terms of poor design means conspiracy against the public taste. Circumstances seem to compel certain conspiracies. In this case the manufacturer—user of the machine—makes only what he can sell, and he sells only to the middle man—abettor of the machine—who stands between the maker and the ultimate consumer. The distributor holds the key to American taste in industrial arts at this time. Until schools train the

public to defy his judgment, he will continue to provide garish colors and obnoxious carvings because they are "fancy" and can be offered at a margin of profit more to his liking. An excellent way out of this difficulty is seen in the facetious suggestion to imprison every such dealer for the period of a thorough course of training in that discrimination many times exercised which we have learned to call taste. Something as drastic as that seems to be necessary unless we are willing to let him run amuck.

The manufacturer and distributor are harnessed to the machine but neither is compelled to pull the traces taut as is the designer. The designer now is offered no training comparable with the meanest schooling such workers can obtain abroad. There is no apprenticeship system to take its place. There is only a haphazard buffeting about in factory and office and so-called designing rooms until by dint of hard knocks the bare facts are learned. The distributor has set himself up as the unquestioned arbiter of "what the public wants"—a slogan as hard to define as beauty itself and surely with no real significance that any serious student has been able to detect. The manufacturer must make what this arbiter will buy and the purchaser has no alternative but to select from the distributor's stock on hand. Thus the vicious circle is complete and the grinding of the wheels carries the designer into the routine of machinery, speed, elimination of expensive characteristics of style, reduction of virile manifestations of the life of other days to the merest superficial ear-marks on ordinary box construction, etc., a routine which is as relentless a maelstrom as modern life has been able to create for any type of human activity. Until the initial point of view is changed on the basis of a sound training for the designer his part in the process of production must be relegated to the category of uncertain expenditures called "overhead—miscellaneous."

In a sense democracy demands mass output; it requires the greatest benefits for the greatest number. The machine offers such benefits, but it must be cor-

rectly used. By itself it is capable of no intentional wrong. Improvement in public appreciation will raise the standard of demand; improvement in training designers will raise the standard of response to that demand. The distributor will soon feel the pulse of the times and require a better product. The manufacturer stands ready now to make all possible improvements, if the product will sell.

There is thus a twofold task involved, half for the special schools, of which we have a few and for the rapid increase in which we devoutly pray, half for the general educational system from the beginnings through the college. The first is a work not within our territory here, a work which should be done or at least controlled by those directly engaged in the field of production. The second is assuredly our province.

Drawing in the schools has been mentioned. Let us use it for what it is worth, but let us incorporate it in a general scheme of training in appreciation of facts rather than of mere paper execution. Industrial arts constitute our home environment, the background for the development of the nation's children. Does not this deserve early attention as a subject about which everyone should know? The real taste of this great land must appear finally in the homes, and a high average in the humble dwelling interior carries with it a significance greater than splendor in the palace. Public taste in home furnishings is a leading factor in national culture; it is a factor in contentment and peace, therefore, also in production, and so in prosperity. We prate too much of fine arts, with capital letters. One day our very students will force us to define them anew. Paintings, always paintings, or sculpture, or other expensive things: is it bolshevism to say that they should be taught last and home furnishings first? What of furniture, curtains, rugs, tea cups, lighting fixtures (and, save the mark, what of apartment house mantels, brass beds, "parlor stoves," and their ilk)?

How many of us teach the history of painting, of sculpture, the history of something or other that is excessively intellectual, usually the product of past autocracies, always difficult to appreciate for the man in

the street because it represents an outlay that history tells him only misuse of public funds and suppression of personal liberty could make possible. How many of us define the stately march of styles that are dead with never a suggestion as to why they once lived. Meanwhile what is happening in American homes, the homes of here and now? How many of us give one lecture a year on art in the home, the art that helps to foster Americanism as paintings and sculpture alone never can.

Schools and colleges are agencies for teaching us how to live and work, but primarily how to live. Is appreciation of home environment such a far-fetched thing to teach children or to impress on college men and women? Colleges should not be above helping to make citizens, and the teaching of politics and economics is not the whole of this task. I plead for the industrial arts in schools and colleges; they are the arts we all live with, the arts we can afford to buy and are obliged to buy; they are the arts the design of which counts in daily existence next only to food and shelter and physical comfort, of which latter they really form part.

It is unquestionably our duty—and this applies to all members of art departments in colleges—to encourage teaching along these lines, not to make everybody a designer but to give everybody an appreciation of design. This great country now has no industrial art. America will bend her neck again to Europe unless we all help to prevent that calamity. Made in Germany was an expensive phrase before the war; but made in Japan, made in France, made anywhere else is much more expensive now that the war is over.

We devote ourselves to making life worth living. Are we doing our utmost when we teach only those elevated subjects which most of our students can never enjoy without going to the museum and when we neglect those phases of art which are with us at our meals and in our rooms and which we must touch and use every moment of our days?

Let us follow the modern philosopher who says: take life where you find it, but don't leave it there!